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The books of the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, the His Dark Materials series by Philip Pullman, and the Twilight saga by Stephenie Meyer are examined in order to better understand why these novels have been so popular among adult readers. Observed factors contributing to the popularity of these young novels include fantastical settings and plotlines, the familiarity of the teen protagonists' experiences, the ability to share the reading experience with others, and the accessibility of the writing.

#### Headings:

Reader's advisory - Adult

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THE HARRY POTTER EFFECT:  
UNDERSTANDING THE CROSSOVER APPEAL  
OF BEST-SELLING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Literature Review	5
I.    Reader-Response Theory and Models of Reading	5
II.   The Motives and Benefits of Reading for Pleasure	9
III.  The Crossover Appeal of Young Adult Literature	13
Methodology	17
Identifying the Bases of Popularity	18
I.    Escape	18
II.   Familiarity	24
III.  Encouragement	32
IV.   Connection with Others	34
V.    Accessibility	36
VI.   The Importance of Marketing	37
Conclusion	40
Suggestions for Further Research	42
Bibliography	43

## INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly one of the most notable, and perhaps most surprising, literary phenomena of the last fifteen years has been the explosive rise to popularity of a number of works of young adult literature. Most famously, the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling has inspired legions of fans ranging from very young children to adults in and beyond middle age to dress like wizards and witches, draw lightening bolts on their foreheads, and engage in spirited debate online and in bookstores and libraries across the world about the motives and merits of a cast of colorful human and inhuman characters. The series has smashed sales records: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the seventh and final book of the series, sold 8.3 million copies in a single day in July 2007 (Itzkoff, 2008); sales of the series in the United States total over 140 million copies (Memmott & Cadden, 2009), while worldwide sales total over 300 million copies (Maughan, 2007). Because Rowling's books were dominating the *New York Times Book Review's* bestseller list, the *Book Review* decided to begin a children's bestseller list, in order "to clear some room," *NYTBR* editor Charles McGrath reported ("NYT' to Debut Kids' Bestseller List" 2000).

However, Rowling's Harry Potter books are not the only young adult titles that have gained millions of fans. The His Dark Materials series by Philip Pullman, comprising three volumes: *The Golden Compass* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), has also sold over 15 million copies worldwide (Gee, 2008) and garnered a great deal of critical acclaim. In 2001 *The Amber Spyglass* became the

first book for younger readers to win the prestigious Whitbread Prize (Copeland, 2003). More recently, the Twilight saga by Stephenie Meyer, including the novels *Twilight* (2005), *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007), and *Breaking Dawn* (2008), has captured the attention of the nation's readers. The most recent book of the saga, *Breaking Dawn*, sold over 1.3 million copies on its first day of release (Itzkoff, 2008), while total U.S. sales of the series top 40 million copies (Memmott & Cadden, 2009). A survey of students at a number of American universities conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* revealed that two of the top ten books being read on college campuses as of March of this year are titles in the Twilight saga; *Twilight* (2005) ranked third on the list, while *Eclipse* (2007) was ranked tenth ("What They're Reading on College Campuses," 2009).

What is perhaps most interesting and note-worthy about these works of young adult literature is that they have gained an astounding degree of popularity among adult readers. While there is no hard data to tell us how many adults may have read these books, or what percentage of the total copies sold are being purchased by adults interested in reading the books, the literature abounds with references to the fact that adults are reading these books. Additionally, there is considerable anecdotal evidence to suggest that their popularity among adults is even more pronounced than one would suspect based solely on the academic literature, and it seems impossible that any book could sell so many millions of copies without acquiring fans among the adults who would have had to be involved in purchasing these books on behalf of young readers.

This paper hopes to shed some light on what about these books captured the attention and affection of so many adult readers. In order to better understand this phenomenon, the author surveyed the literature on how readers are understood to interact

with a text, why they read, and in particular why adults might read young adult literature. The three young adult series mentioned above, the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, the His Dark Materials series by Philip Pullman, and the Twilight saga by Stephenie Meyer, were each considered individually in light of the knowledge gained through this background reading as well as some additional research conducted on the series themselves.

Amid growing reports that Americans of every age are spending less time reading for fun than they did in decades past (Crain, 2007), these books are being read and embraced by countless millions of readers, and we as librarians and information professionals need to understand why. Perhaps this knowledge would allow us to provide our patrons with additional books that met the same needs or provided them with the same experiences as these blockbuster young adult titles, continuing the momentum begun by *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Twilight*, or *The Golden Compass*. Ultimately, learning more about what readers read and why can only allow us to be better librarians.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand more about how the Harry Potter series, His Dark Materials series, and the Twilight series have become so popular among adult readers, I focused my research on three distinct topics: reader-response theory and models of reading for pleasure; why adults read for pleasure and what they get out of it; and the crossover appeal of young adult literature.

### I. Reader-Response Theory and Models of Reading

The reader-response theory or school of criticism focuses on the interactive nature of reading. Rosenblatt (1982) calls reading a transaction and stresses that both the reader and the text are involved in making meaning. Prior to the emergence of this school of thought, meaning was thought to exist inside a text and the reader was expected to uncover *the* meaning of that text (Spiegel, 1998). Spiegel (1998, pg. 42) calls reading “a dynamic, reflective, introspective process,” (1998), while Rosenblatt (1982) explains the process in more detail:

The words in their particular pattern stir up elements of memory, activate areas of consciousness. The reader, bringing past experience of language and of the world to the task, sets up tentative notions of a subject, of some framework into which to fit the ideas as the words unfurl. If the subsequent words do not fit into the framework, it may have to be revised, thus opening up new and further possibilities for the text that follows. This implies a constant series of selections from the multiple possibilities offered by the text and their synthesis into an organized meaning (pg. 268).

Thus, meaning is personal to the reader but also grounded in text. This means that multiple meanings are not only expected but to be celebrated (Spiegel, 1998), as they demonstrate the richness of the reading process and the unique perspectives of each reader. Furthermore, reader-response theory holds that the transaction between reader and

text is unique to a particular time and set of circumstances (Rosenblatt, 1982), allowing the same reader to experience a text entirely differently when it is encountered at another time in that reader's life. Thus, adult readers might construct entirely different meanings from the reading of texts intended for younger readers than those younger readers would, or even than they themselves would have if they had read those texts as children or young adults. Therefore, we must be aware that it would be a mistake to assume that a young reader's experience of a book like *Twilight* is the same or similar to an adult reader's experience of that same book.

Rosenblatt differentiates between two different mental states, or stances, with which a reader might approach a text, the efferent and the aesthetic. In the efferent stance, the reader is "building up the meanings, the ideas, the directions to be retained; attention focuses on accumulating what is to be carried away at the end of the reading" (Rosenblatt, 1982; pg. 269). This stance would typically be adopted when reading something like a textbook or a manual. The aesthetic stance is the one most commonly used in pleasure reading, and the stance most frequently emphasized in reader-response criticism. Rosenblatt describes the aesthetic stance as an inward-shifting of attention, with focus being centered on what is being created in the act of reading. Not just the meaning of the words will be considered but also what those words point to in the reader's own experience, what people, places, things or feelings the words call up in the reader. Even the sound and rhythm of the words may impact the reader (Rosenblatt, 1982). As the reader in the aesthetic stance creates meaning, he or she is also responding to that meaning. The reader may be enjoying the story; taking pleasure or discomfort in the sounds of the words; feeling approval or disapproval at the actions of the characters;



or realizing that the assumptions about life that he or she brought into the reading process are at odds with the situations, attitudes or morals being experienced through the text (Rosenblatt, 1982).

It is important to note that any text can be read from either stance (Rosenblatt, 1982), and that most reading is done on a continuum between the two (Rosenblatt, 1982; Spiegel, 1998). A reader's stance inevitably affects what meaning is gathered from the text, but without intimate knowledge of the reader, it is impossible to guess which text or kind of text will be most evocative to him or her (Rosenblatt, 1982). Thus, in examining these pieces of young adult literature, we must keep in mind that they may be approached very differently by each individual reader along a different part of the efferent-aesthetic continuum, and that what is merely informative to one reader may seem poetic to another.

Lastly, Rosenblatt decries the emphasis in our culture on things and actions that are primarily practical, technical and quantitative, and on the lack of attention paid to the value of aesthetic reading, which she argues has as its intrinsic purpose to be pleasurable and interesting for its own sake (1982). This begs the question of whether books for younger readers like the Harry Potter series are so appealing to adults because they represent a clear refutation of the dominant practical priorities of the adult world and a turn back toward fun for its own sake.

In addition to understanding how readers construct meaning through interaction with text, we within the library and information profession need to recognize the various models of reading that lie at the heart of our conversations and policies regarding reading for pleasure. Ross has identified seven different but not mutually exclusive models of reading, each of which she says has a story to “tell about the power of the text, the role of

the reader, and the effect on the reader of what is read” (2009, pg. 638). Two of these models, Reader as Poacher and Blueprints for Living, relate to our examination of why so many adults are reading books intended for a younger audience. In the Reader as Poacher model, readers are thought to selectively appropriate sections of text to use for their own purposes, to create their own meaning, which may be very different from what the author had in mind (Ross, 2009). This way of thinking about reading has been at the heart of studies to figure out what readers actually do with texts in the context of their everyday lives (Ross, 2009). Ross goes on to report that,

In case studies of actual readers, people report that they seize upon whatever speaks directly to their immediate lives, they forget or simply skip over the parts they don’t find meaningful, and they sometimes rewrite unsatisfying endings. They are not usually trying to read like literary critics whose goal is to achieve a comprehensive, unified interpretation of significant textual features (2009, pg. 648).

Thus, we should not attempt to make assumptions about what makes particular books popular by considering the text as a whole but instead by trying to isolate what aspects of the work may be appealing or meaningful to adult readers.

The Blueprint for Living model of reading is similar to the Readers as Poachers model in that both hold that the reader develops a personal relationship with the text. In the Blueprint model, readers gain examples to follow, blueprints for life, and rules to live by through their reading (Ross, 2009). Some readers say that pleasure reading changes how they view the world and what they believe, thereby leading them to change their behavior after they’re done reading. Other readers specifically indicate they prefer books featuring characters whose lives might provide good blueprints for how they should conduct their own lives (Ross, 2009). Books are lived through; readers feel the books have changed their lives, and simultaneously that the books are about them. Although the

books we're examining were written with a primarily younger audience in mind, we must keep in mind that many readers approach books looking for guidance in how to live, and that these specific books may have been chosen for that reason.

## **II. The Motives and Benefits of Reading for Pleasure**

Ross's models of reading relate well to my next avenue of inquiry: understanding why adults read for pleasure and what they gain from such reading. In her earlier study of self-identified heavy readers, Ross (2000) found that adults who read for pleasure reaped very valuable personal rewards from it. Ross and her graduate students interviewed a total of 194 adults who fall within the ten percent of the North American population who read one or more books a week (pg. 72). These interviews revealed that readers singled out as most meaningful those titles that told the reader's own story, though the resemblance between the story being told and the reader's actual life may only be perceptible to the reader (pg. 75). Ross claims, "When the right match is made between reader and story, readers use the text to create a story about themselves. They read themselves into the story and then read the story into their lives, which then becomes a part of them" (pg. 76). The most commonly-made claim by the interview subjects was that their significant book "had opened up a new perspective, helped its reader see things differently, or offered an enlarged set of possibilities" (pg 75). Additionally, the interviewees said this particular book offered a model for living, inspiration, or even changed the readers' beliefs, attitudes, or perspectives on the world (pg. 76). Some readers claimed the significant book gave them inner strength or reassurance. In total,

Ross identified seven ways in which the subjects reported that a book made an impact in their lives:

- enlarging their perspective or scope of possibilities;
- providing models for identity; by providing reassurance, comfort, and confirmation of self worth;
- providing a connection with others;
- bestowing the courage needed to make a change;
- providing acceptance; and
- assisting in understanding the world (pgs. 77-79).

Ross argues that “The reader’s own preoccupations work as a filter, so that readers pay particular attention to parts of the book – sometimes minor characters and subordinate themes – that address their needs” (pg. 79). Therefore, in order to understand why particular texts become so popular or significant among adult readers, we must keep in mind the needs of those readers.

Brewis, Gericke and Kruger (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of the literature on adults and pleasure reading published prior to 1992, from which they were able to conclude that,

Adults read fiction for pleasure, to relieve tension, for communication and to enhance societal consciousness. Adults also use fiction to acquire education and information about life, to escape from the drudgery and stress of everyday life, and to seek assistance in resolving personal problems. (pg. 16)

The notion that adults read to escape the drudgery of life is supported by a recent survey of booksellers conducted by *Book Publishing Report*, entitled “Category Review: Fantasy Lets Consumers Escape from ‘Bleak Reality’” (2009). Many of the survey respondents felt that the fantasy genre would perform more positively in 2009-2010 as a

result of readers' need to escape the "dismal reality" of the current economic and political climate (pg. 1). Another respondent recalled that the fantasy genre had done particularly well in the months following 9/11, another bleak time in recent history, because readers felt the need for an escape (pg. 2).

The conclusions of Brewis et al. that readers read for a number of reasons that are complicated and controlled by both external and internal factors is shared by Nell (1988), who undertook a series of five studies over six years in order to investigate the causes and consequences of pleasure, or "ludic," reading. In the fifth of these studies, intended to examine what he termed "the sovereignty of the reading experience," Nell's methods consisted of recording a group discussion among committed pleasure readers about their experiences reading, as well as recording the readers' responses to questions inquiring after their reading habits and reading mood in two questionnaires. Subjects reported reading as a form of escape; one subject claimed that, "for the few hours a day I read 'trash,' I escape the cares of those around me, as well as escaping my own cares and dissatisfactions" (pg. 43). Another subject wrote on a questionnaire that what she wanted in the world within a book was not something similar to her own, but something that was safe and nonthreatening because it was completely different (pg. 43). In addition to escape, subjects reported using pleasure reading to change their moods, though reading books with themes or plots too similar to the reader's real-life negative experiences might evoke such reactions as to prove extremely upsetting. In addition, many subjects reported very much enjoying rereading well-liked and familiar stories, but such rereading did not make up a major portion of their pleasure reading (pg. 44).

In an attempt to examine what motivates adults to invest time in reading, Usherwood and Toyne (2002) interviewed individual subjects about their experiences reading and conducted focus groups. The most common first response from subjects when asked what reading contributed to their lives included or alluded to escapism (pg. 34). For various reasons, the readers seemed to feel that they needed to be able to get away from their daily lives and the pressures of living in the modern world (pgs. 34-35). Some readers viewed escapism as being actively involved in another world very different from their own; while for others it meant simply becoming entirely involved in and distracted by the action of the story (pg. 35). One subject explained,

‘I go completely into it, and become one of the characters and I have to stop myself from talking like that character. So if it’s something like Jane Austen then I find myself thinking in that old English way. I have to stop myself coming out with something strange. To me I move into another world when I read fiction particularly. I just get completely absorbed and I’m there and I’m involved and I’m feeling all of the emotions and everything else.’ (pgs. 35-36)

Interviewees also cited relaxation as a reason for reading, feeling that reading for pleasure represented a way for them to induce relaxation in their lives, and to relieve boredom and monotony (pg. 35). Further, some readers escape into a life closer to their own at an earlier time, allowing them to reminisce through the act of reading (pg. 36). Additionally, as in previous studies, reading fiction was felt to be able to alter moods, and even lessen depression (pg. 35). Participants also felt that reading for pleasure contributed to their learning and practical knowledge, both in terms of the development of their knowledge about the world and in their own personal development (pgs. 36-38), similar to what Ross (1999) found in her study. Specifically, for many of the readers who participated in the study,

...reading about other people's experiences was seen to ratify their own. Often, the readers gained confidence as they realized that they were not alone in their experience and that, in a sense, imaginative literature could instill a sense of belonging, wherein the reader was brought back into connection with others. (pg. 38)

Additionally, reading was also felt to contribute to an improved ability to relate to other people and to understand other cultures and belief systems (pg. 39)

Moyer (2007) focused on the educational outcomes of leisure reading in her study, which made use of interview and survey data to create a model of four areas of educational outcomes from leisure reading. These four categories were people and relationships; countries, cultures and history; life enrichment; and different perspectives. Moyer notes that learning is often an unexpected gain of pleasure reading, but one that can be very important to the reader (pg. 70). It was noted that seemingly any book, no matter the theme, time period, plot, or genre, could teach the reader about other perspectives, challenge their own ideas, and make them think differently, just as long as the characters and setting were different from those in their daily lives (pg. 74). Therefore, even books set in fantastical places or with supernatural characters could provoke new insights in readers and change how they view their daily lives.

### **III. The Crossover Appeal of Young Adult Literature**

Unfortunately, there has been relatively little written in the literature to explain why adults enjoy reading young adult and children's literature, and there have been even fewer studies done on the subject.

Cart (2009) makes the point that there have been popular crossover novels for centuries, including such luminous works as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*, but

that these books were written for adults and appropriated by children, and that not until recently have adult readers begun picking up books written for children and young adults (pg. 74). Cart goes on to state that what exactly makes a book “YA” isn’t clear, but that he had long understood that a central feature of such a book would be a young adult protagonist, while noting that the term that might mean someone as old as 25 (2009, pg. 75).

Follos (2002) points out that books labeled “young adult” were not necessarily written by the author with that audience in mind (pg. 29). Like Cart, she suggests that the central feature leading to a “YA” label might be the inclusion of a major teenage protagonist. Rosen (1997) suggests that young adult novels might include elements that are stylistically or thematically adult, and she points out that YA novels, which tend to be direct and concise, contain just those things many reviewers criticize adult books for lacking (pg. 29). Follos (2002) agrees, stating that, “The books we’re talking about are inspiring, compelling, and captivating reads. They are expressive for middle and high school students, and yet provocative enough for not-so-young adults” (pg. 29). She goes on to argue that teens will not stick around to finish a book that is boring or slow, and that they demand “integrity, empathy, and credibility” in their literature (pg. 30). “Teen readers want to be smacked with the truth, no matter how humbling,” Follos (2002) states. “They’ve already stumbled through a multitude of compromising situations. It helps to read about other kids who have also stumbled. For the adult reader who’s bringing personal memories to the story, the effect may be stunning. For those of us kept at a distance from our teenagers’ social lives, the experience will be an eye-opener” (pg. 30). Follos explains that though these books are action-packed and energetic, they are



quick reads that can be picked up and put down without losing the flow of the story. Additionally, she argues that these books allow adults to remember the stark and sometimes painful reality of teenage life even when their memories have softened the edges of their own lived experiences (pg. 30).

Many of these positive statements about the power of young adult literature were echoed by the participants in Overton's (2003) study examining the experiences of adults who read it. In Overton's focus groups, participants explained that they read young adult fiction to escape, or said they simply found it "pleasurable" and had a "good time reading it" (pg. 25). Moreover, subjects reported enjoying the ability to share what they were reading with their teenage children (pg. 25). Overall, the participants in Overton's focus groups described three main features of young adult literature that made it more appealing to them than adult fiction: feelings of wonder, open-endedness, and hopefulness (pg. 27). Young adult literature was described as being hopeful and showing a sense of wonder at the world, as opposed to adult literature which was labeled by participants as "depressing" and "negative," tending to depict a world where "everything's awful" (pg. 26). There was the sense among the participants that reading novels with a young adult perspective allowed them to see the world through the eyes of a younger version of themselves. The members of the study groups also lauded the way death is handled in young adult novels, stating that they thought "the attitudes about it were much healthier because the characters struggled, dealt with it, and eventually tried to move on" (pg. 27). Participants also appreciated that the romantic relationships in the young adult novels they had read did not necessarily lead to sex or the typical adult path of dating, marriage and children (pg. 27). Most of the readers also agreed that young

adult novels tended to be meaningful but not time-consuming reads (pg. 30).

Participants felt that reading these books allowed them to revisit their own childhood experiences in a new way (pg. 33), while also giving them a window into the lives of today's young people (pg. 34). Overton (2003) claims that these coming-of-age stories resonate for adults because,

The core challenges of figuring out an identity, being true, trying to hold on to those close to them, deciding whether or not to conform, who to follow, when to lead, what and when to risk, finding love, and how to change are all things that shift shapes, but remain constant forces to challenge people throughout their lives (pg. 40).

Adults use young adult fiction to reflect on who they've become with a clarity only possible through time and the distance provided by a cast of characters and an imagined story (pg. 41).

## **METHODOLOGY**

In attempting to gain a better understanding of why these best-selling works of young adult literature were so popular among adult readers, I first undertook to read them. Although I had previously read most of the books, I felt that I needed to approach all of them with new eyes. The process of reading, or re-reading, all three series took approximately three months. As I read, I took notes of my impressions and began to formulate ideas about which aspects of the books adults might find appealing. After I finished reading all fourteen books, I began my literature review. As I read the literature on how readers interact with texts, why adults read for pleasure, and what it is about young adult literature in general that adults find appealing, I made connections with what I had seen and experienced within the texts themselves, frequently jotting notes in the margins of articles and eventually putting together a list of factors that contributed to the novels' popularity that was drawn both from my own experience with the books and the professional literature.

## **IDENTIFYING THE BASES OF POPULARITY**

In order to understand why the books of the Harry Potter series, His Dark Materials series, and the Twilight saga have become so popular among adults, we must consider what they might provide the adult who chooses to read them. Additionally, we must examine what efforts were made by their publishers to position these books in the marketplace so as to maximize the amount of attention they would receive from the public at large.

### **I. Escape**

First and foremost, these books transport their readers beyond their ordinary lives to different worlds, worlds that are simultaneously very similar to and very different from our own. This movement beyond the reader's normal life and into something very different is the essence of the "escape" mentioned in the literature (Overton, 2003; Usherwood and Toyne, 2002; Nell, 1988; Brewis, Gericke and Kruger, 1998). I believe it is no coincidence that all of these books are part of the fantasy genre, because the incorporation of fantasy elements, including magic, mythical beasts, parallel universes, and vampires, provides the reader with experiences so different from those he or she is likely to have in their real lives.

The Harry Potter books are about a young boy who learns he is a wizard and is sent to a boarding school with other magical children where he is given lessons on how to brew potions and make items disappear and change shape, among other things. As Tucker (1999) notes, "at Hogwarts, lessons provide some of the best and most appealing fantasies of an existence so very much more interesting than ordinary, humdrum school

life” (pg. 224). Harry rides broomsticks and travels via Floo powder, and in the first book alone he encounters trolls, centaurs, and unicorns. In each successive book, the reader, like Harry, is introduced to more of this fictional magical world, which exists side-by-side with the fictional real world, just as the world of Rowling’s books exists side-by-side with the reader’s real world. Like Harry, the reader is able to escape from the unpleasant realities of life in the real world to a place of magic and wonder.

Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series begins in the English university town of Oxford, but it is quickly apparent that this world is not entirely like our own. For one thing, every human being has a daemon, an animal of some kind with the ability to speak and interact, who represents a part of the person’s being, the part we might call the soul, that lives outside their body. Our heroine, Lyra, has Pantalaimon, who she calls Pan. There are other subtle clues that this world is different than ours that the reader will notice: electric lights are called anbaric in Lyra’s world, people fly in zeppelins rather than airplanes, and the Church seems all powerful. As the reader progresses through the first book, *The Golden Compass* (1995), it is confirmed that this world is not our own by references to places and events that sound familiar but aren’t quite right. What we know of as the United States is referred to as New Denmark, while the aeronaut Lee Scoresby is said to be from the nation of Texas; Lyra seems to live in an alternate world in which the medieval colonization of North America by the Vikings of Denmark was successful and the country of Texas lasted beyond a few years. The mix of familiar and unfamiliar provokes a profound curiosity in the reader, but only an adult reader, who is more likely than a child or teen to be familiar with world history, will fully be able to appreciate at what point Lyra’s world differs from our own.

The world of the Twilight saga is not so very different than our own. The novels are set in the small town of Forks, Washington, a real town on the Olympic Peninsula. The life of Bella Swan, the saga's protagonist and narrator, is that of an ordinary teenage girl, until she meets the beautiful but inscrutable Edward Cullen and his adopted family of equally gorgeous but enigmatic brothers and sisters. Like Bella, the reader slowly begins to see that there is something not quite human about Edward, and it isn't long before both Bella and the reader realize that he isn't human. Edward and all of the Cullens are in fact vampires; quite suddenly, both Bella and the reader find themselves in a world where the supernatural is real. In the second book of the saga, *New Moon* (2006), the possibilities of Bella's world expand even further as she, and the reader, learns that the young men of a nearby Native American tribe have become werewolves.

In each of these unique fantasy worlds, the protagonist (and thus the reader) discovers that he or she is special, picked out by fate or some other power to play an important role within their already-special world. Most of us grow up wanting to be important, different in some unique and valuable way, and by reading about these characters, adult readers are able to experience vicariously the thrill and immense anxiety of being special, long past the age at which most adults have had to accept that they're pretty much just like everyone else. Adult readers are able to escape into a typical childhood fantasy: being a hero.

*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997), the first book in Rowling's series about the young wizard, begins in the real world. Harry is an ordinary, if neglected, child, who lives with his aunt, uncle, and cousin in a suburban housing tract that would be very familiar to most adult readers. But almost as soon as he enters the magical world,

Harry learns that he is very special, famous in fact (1997, pg. 55). Harry is a hero of the wizarding world, because as a baby he was mysteriously impervious to the evil wizard Voldemort's attempt to kill him, and as a result of trying to kill Harry, Voldemort was stripped of all his powers and disappeared. Tucker (1999) calls Harry a character "from the same stable that produced *Cinderella* and subsequent stories featuring badly treated orphans or stepchildren born to great things" (pg. 226). Thus, the reader knows from the beginning that Harry is no ordinary boy, that there is something very special about him. Much later in the series, both Harry and the reader learn that it has been prophesied that Harry must kill Voldemort once and for all or be killed by him, thereby sealing Harry's fate as potential savior of the wizarding world (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 2003, pg. 844).

Lyra, too, has been the subject of a prophecy. Very early on in *The Golden Compass* (1995), the Master and the Librarian have a conversation about the young girl in which the Master reveals that, "Lyra has a part to play in all this, and a major one" (Knopf trade paperback edition, 2002, pg. 31). Thus, the reader knows quite early on, even before Lyra becomes aware that there is anything special about her, that she is fated to play a central role in what was to come. Later in the book, we learn more about Lyra's fate, which is the subject of a witch prophecy: "'She is destined to bring about the end of destiny. But she must do so without knowing what she is doing, as if it were her nature and not her destiny to do it. If she's told what she must do, it will all fail; death will sweep through all the worlds; it will be the triumph of despair, forever'" (pg. 310). So, like Harry, Lyra is destined to either rescue or damn her world, but only the reader, and not she herself, can know it.

Bella of the Twilight saga is also special, but perhaps not on the same grand scale as Harry and Lyra. First, Bella is notable because she's the new girl in a very small high school, but more importantly for her story, her blood has a particularly unique quality that makes it almost irresistible to vampires, particularly to Edward Cullen. Edward tells Bella that she is “*exactly* my brand of heroin,” and that no other human has ever appealed to him so much (*Twilight*, 2005, pg. 268, pg. 300). Bella's most intriguing quality, both for Edward and the reader, is her imperviousness to his special vampiric power, the ability to hear others' thoughts. Edward reveals that he's never been unable to hear what was inside someone's head before (2005, pg. 180-81); Bella is unique among all the humans and vampires he has ever encountered. In later books, Bella learns that her mind is also impervious to other vampires with powers to control or tap into the mind. Her shielding ability is transformed into a supernatural power itself when Bella becomes a vampire in the fourth book of the saga, *Breaking Dawn* (2008), with very great benefits for herself and her family. Thus, again, we readers know almost from the beginning of the series that the protagonist is unique. In this case, Bella, a seemingly ordinary girl, is chosen by Edward from all the humans and vampires he has encountered in his 100+ years of living as being the sole object of his undying love, plus she alone is impervious to his mind-reading abilities. This is heady stuff, whether “you're a teenage girl, or can access the spirit of such inside yourself” (de Lint, 2008, pg. 41).

Adult readers of these novels also get to experience vicariously the joy and wonder of simply being young and being able to “get away” with all sorts of mischief (Overton, 2003, pg. 32). Some readers might delight in the descriptions of Harry and his friends sneaking around late at night and searching the drafty corridors and chambers of



an old castle, or Lyra's carefree capers all over the roofs of Jordan College. For other readers, it might simply be the ability to exist for a while in a world where "dismal reality" ("Category Review: Fantasy Lets Consumers Escape from 'Bleak Reality'", 2009, pg. 1), in the form of typical adult concerns like bills, housework, and childcare, cannot intrude.

The books of the Harry Potter series, His Dark Materials series, and Twilight saga may also provide a much-needed break from the world of adult relationships. Freitas (2009) claims that her college students are looking for some "seriously chaste, old-fashioned romance – we're talking stargazing and hand-holding, the end," and that they're sick of the emphasis on sex in their relationships (pg. 33). Some of the participants in Overton's (2003) focus groups would certainly agree (see pg. 15 above). Rowling, Pullman, and Meyer all make an effort to limit the descriptions of physical intimacy between their characters. In the Harry Potter books, nothing more mature than kissing is ever mentioned, and allusions to sexual desire or jealousy are kept very brief and very vague. Lyra's story doesn't include any romance until the very end of the series, when she falls in love with Will, her ally and traveling companion. They experience "the most tender of first loves" (Freitas, 2009, pg. 35), but their relationship is brief; they are told that all of the holes between worlds must be closed and so there will be no way for them to see each other (*The Amber Spyglass*, Knopf trade paperback edition, 2002, pgs. 491-97). Pullman hints at sexual intimacy, but in such an oblique way that it is doubtful whether younger readers would read the passage in the same way as adults:

Will put his hand on hers. A new mood had taken hold of him, and he felt resolute and peaceful. Knowing exactly what he was doing and exactly what it

would mean, he moved his hand from Lyra's wrist and stroked the red-gold fur of her daemon. Lyra gasped. But her surprise was mixed with a pleasure so like the joy that flooded through her when she had put the fruit to his lips that she couldn't protest, because she was breathless. With a racing heart she responded in the same way: she put her hand on the silky warmth of Will's daemon, and as her fingers tightened in the fur, she knew that Will was feeling exactly what she was. And she knew, too, that neither daemon would change now, having felt a lover's hands on them. These were their shapes for life: they would want no other. So, wondering whether any lovers before them had made this blissful discovery, they lay together as the earth turned slowly and the moon and stars blazed above them (*The Amber Spyglass*, Knopf trade paperback edition, 2002, pg. 498-99).

In the Twilight saga, the lack of mature sexuality is more surprising but is incorporated into the story. Edward tells Bella that they can't be physically intimate because the risk that he would lose control and harm her, either out of thirst for her blood or because he is so strong and she so comparatively fragile, is too great (*Twilight*, 2005, pg. 310). Instead, Edward and Bella "manage to sustain an erotic tension the likes of which I haven't seen elsewhere over the course of more than 2,000 pages" (Freitas, 2009, pg. 34). As de Lint notes, the Twilight books "so faithfully relate the high drama of chaste, romantic high school love" (2008, pg. 39) that both young readers hoping for such a relationship themselves and older readers wishing they could recapture the electricity of first love and first desire will be swept away.

## II. Familiarity

This ability to remind an adult reader of long passed and long forgotten feelings and experiences is one aspect of the familiarity that contributes to make these novels so appealing. As Overton (2003) explains, these novels are inherently coming-of-age-stories, and their themes resonate far beyond the boundaries of adolescence (pg. 40).

These young adult novels will also seem familiar to adult readers because their authors borrowed liberally from the corpus of world literature in the process of writing them.

Harry, Lyra, and Bella are incredibly likable characters and very easy to identify with, because, despite their unique attributes and fates, they are normal kids. Harry is skinny and short and wears glasses; his hair sticks up all over the place. He would probably be called a nerd (Tucker, 1999, pg. 227). But Harry is also “a boy’s boy” (Maguire, 1999) who doesn’t tend to excel in his classes but is quite talented at, and entirely preoccupied by, the wizarding world’s most popular sport, Quidditch. Lyra’s childhood is “an unbroken series of small adventures, hair-raising exploits, and minor wars among the local tribes of Oxford’s children,” (Chabon, 2004, pg. 26). Lyra is a girl who can’t be bothered to keep clean and who knows how to lie with aplomb; she has, Michael Chabon writes, “a complexity of character,” that is unusual for works of children’s or young adult literature (2004, pg. 26). She is written, in short, to have all the intricacies and subtleties of a real girl of 12, and to have had experiences that will seem to many adults to be “part of the familiar territory of childhood life” (“Learning to say goodbye,” Rustin and Rustin, 2003, pg. 423). Because Bella Swan narrates the majority of the *Twilight* saga, the reader isn’t privy to many details about her appearance, other than a few statements like,

But physically, I’d never fit in anywhere. I *should* be tan, sporty, blond – a volleyball player, or a cheerleader, perhaps – all the things that go with living in the valley of the sun. Instead, I was ivory-skinned, without even the excuse of blue eyes or red hair, despite the constant sunshine. I had always been slender, but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete; I didn’t have the necessary hand-eye coordination to play sports without humiliating myself – and harming both myself and anyone else who stood too close (*Twilight*, 2005, pg. 10).

Bella's description of herself is self-deprecating, but the vague description she provides (pale skin, thin but not athletic, clumsy) allows the reader to "see" Bella however he or she wants. The fact that she's clumsy makes her nonthreatening to the reader and a character with whom almost anyone could empathize.

The experience of being an adolescent, of being in love for the first time, of not being sure who you are or what you want to do in life, of trying to fit in and figure out your place in the group, may be a painful one. These trials and tribulations tend to be universal. However, adult memories of adolescence also tend to fade with time, particularly if one's teenage experiences were especially painful or embarrassing. These young adult novels so skillfully evoke the familiar experiences of growing up that they provide powerful vehicles through which adult readers may reminisce about and even relive their own adolescences, but from a safe fictional distance.

Although the plot of the entire *His Dark Materials* series occurs over approximately a year, Lyra learns a great deal about the world and herself in that period of time. In *The Golden Compass* (1995), Lyra discovers that the man she always knew as her uncle, Lord Asriel, is in fact her father (Knopf trade paperback edition, 2002, pg. 121), and that the glamorous Mrs. Coulter is her mother (2002 edition, pg. 124). Moreover, Lyra learns that her mother abandoned her as a baby (2002 edition, pg. 123), and later discovers that Mrs. Coulter is in charge of a project in which daemons are being cut away, or interceded, from their children (2002 edition, pg. 213). The book closes with Lord Asriel himself severing the bond between Lyra's friend Roger and his daemon in order to harness the immense energy released by the severed bond to open a bridge into another world (2002 edition, pg. 393). In this one book, merely the first of the series,

Lyra learns that parents are not always good people with their child's best interests at heart, that they can be selfish and cruel despite feeling love for their child, that they are in fact fallible ("Learning to say goodbye," Rustin and Rustin, 2003, pg. 417). This experience of a parent's ability to be deeply flawed and yet still a loving parent is something many children may not be able to understand, but it is probably something with which most adults can identify. As Lyra proceeds in her story, she deals with the death of her friend Roger and other compatriots, and experiences the tender passion of first love and the acute pain of being forever separated from the object of that love. Though all of these events are set in a fantastical series of alternate universes, the heart of Pullman's story is a tale of growing up. The author explained it this way in an interview for *School Library Journal*,

So, when I found myself writing this book, what I wanted to do was to use the apparatus of fantasy in order to do what writers of realism are more typically interested in doing, namely, to explore this business about being a human being – what it feels like and what it's like, what it means for us to grow up, to pass away from our childhood, to suffer, to learn, to grow, to develop, to die, and so on. And that's what I mean by saying that it's not really a work of fantasy. It's as realistic as I could make it (Odean, 2000, pg. 54).

Bella's story, despite the vampires and werewolves, is, at its heart, a sweet and innocent love story (Blasingame, 2006, pg. 629). As such, it allows the adult reader to relive the excitement and passion of his or her own teenage romance. The problems incumbent on being in love with a vampire stand in for more common teenage relationship obstacles like malicious gossip or belonging to different cliques, the influence of which tend to fade with age and maturity. Bella's heartbreak when Edward leaves, the description of which accounts for at least half of the second volume in the

saga, *New Moon* (2006), is operatic in its scope, perfectly mimicking the tone of teenage melodrama and angst:

He was gone. With shaky legs, ignoring the fact that my action was useless, I followed him into the forest. The evidence of his path had disappeared instantly. There were no footprints, the leaves were still again, but I walked forward without thinking. I could not do anything else. I had to keep moving. If I stopped looking for him, it was over. Love, life, meaning...over (2006, pg. 73).

Reading through these descriptions of teenage heartbreak may allow the adult reader to remember how truly painful the end of young love could be. Of course, these passages and the memories of teenage drama they provoke could also be a source of humor, perhaps explaining why at least one of Overton's (2003) focus group participants said they enjoyed young adult literature because it was "funny" (pg. 25).

The Harry Potter books provide a longer lens through which to glimpse growing up, since they follow Harry and his friends from the age of 11 until the age of 17. By following these characters over so many years, Rowling is able to provide a picture of how friendships change and grow over time as the people within the friendships themselves grow and change. Rowling's three main characters, Harry, Ron, and Hermione, each represent a different set of adolescent concerns and problems: Harry is a small kid who has never quite fit in anywhere but nevertheless finds himself the object of endless speculation; Hermione is brilliant but can seem overbearing and has bushy hair and big front teeth; Ron is a tall, skinny kid with flame red hair, one of seven children from a poor family, who struggles to find his own identity. Michael Winerip confesses, "As Harry worries that first day about whether he can compete with the privileged children of Hogwarts alums, I found myself thinking back 30 years to my first days at Harvard, wondering how, coming from a blue-collar shipyard town and public high

school, I could ever compete with preppies from Exeter and Andover” (1999, pg. 26).

About the Harry Potter series Radigan (2001) writes,

And what of friendship and quiet courage? The kind of courage to face a bogart – or our own greatest fear. Remember not having enough money for the latest toy or style? Or being too tall, or too clumsy, or having hair that was too bushy? It is no wonder that Harry appeals across genders, ages, races, and ethnicities. We all have felt left out and misunderstood. We all have had our fears and embarrassments made public. We all have been misunderstood and mocked. We all have had to find the desperate courage to go on. And we all have felt the wonder of things going just right. We have huddled with our friends in laughter and mischief and enjoyed the moment (pg. 694).

What all of these books, the Harry Potter series, His Dark Materials series, and Twilight saga, do so well is to present a realistic picture of the feelings and experiences of youth, even in fantastic settings, so that we adult readers can be reminded of how it felt to be young.

However, these novels also provoke feelings of familiarity for quite a different reason. Each one of these young adult series makes liberal use of the plots, conventions or characters of previous works of literature. As Gregory Maguire says of the Harry Potter series, “the books do nothing very new, but they do it brilliantly” (1999, pg. 12).

The Twilight saga is part of a long and varied tradition of vampire stories. Beginning with the publication of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker in 1897, the undead being that drinks human blood has been a fixture of the popular imagination. More recent vampire novels include Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and its sequels, which are collectively known as the Vampire Chronicles series, and the Southern Vampire Mysteries series by Charlaine Harris, first published 2001 and recently made into an HBO series called “True Blood”. In 1994, Rice’s *Interview* was turned into a major motion picture. The “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” television series became a cult hit

during its run from 1997 to 2003 and led to the creation of the spin-off show “Angel” about a vampire character featured in “Buffy.” In reading the Twilight saga, therefore, the adult reader will recognize the series as part of a long tradition of vampire stories.

The Harry Potter series continues two noted traditions in English literature, that of the hero’s quest and the school story. As Maguire points out, “Rowling’s books conform to one of the archetypal patterns of fantastic children’s literature: the education of the hero” (1999). Throughout the seven book series, Harry learns ever more about his nemesis, Voldemort, and gains the tools and knowledge, magical as well as moral, necessary to defeat him. Although the nature of his quest may not be apparent to Harry until the fateful moment in the fifth book when he learns about the prophecy regarding him and Voldemort (see pg. 20 above; *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 2003, pg. 844), it has been clear to the perceptive reader all along. In each of the preceding four books, Harry has had to battle either Voldemort himself or Voldemort’s servant; a big showdown seems inevitable. An adult reader of Harry Potter would be likely to recognize the heroic parallels with other famous works of fantasy literature: Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*; Wart from *The Sword in the Stone*; and Ged from *A Wizard of Earthsea* (Maguire, 1999). Additionally, the fact that the Harry Potter books are set at Hogwarts, a magical boarding school located in a castle somewhere deep in the British countryside, connect them to the long run of English “public school stories” (Tucker, 1999, pg. 222). The Harry Potter series, like other such school stories, harkens back to a time when it was commonly agreed that a boarding school was the best place for a child to learn and grow up (Tucker, 1999, pg. 223). The black and white struggle of good vs. evil, the lack of any reference to contemporary social issues like divorce or drugs, the



inclusion of malicious teachers who call students by their surnames, all of these factors place the series within a backward-looking tradition of stories that appeal to adults who want to read about a world similar to that they remember from the stories of their own childhood (Tucker, 1999, pg. 221).

Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials series relies more heavily on previously published material than either the Harry Potter novels or the Twilight saga. Pullman took the title of his series, and much of its plot, directly from John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* ("Where is home?" Ruskin and Ruskin, 2003, pg. 98). Pullman includes a passage from the second book of the poem at the beginning of *The Golden Compass* (1995):

Into this wild abyss,  
The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,  
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,  
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed  
Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight,  
Unless the almighty maker them ordain  
His dark materials to create more worlds,  
Into this wild abyss the wary fiend  
Stood on the brink of hell and looked a while,  
Pondering his voyage...

Pullman has written a story for young adults in which he re-works the themes from the stories of the Fall of Man and the doctrine of the Original Sin ("Learning to say goodbye," Ruskin and Ruskin, 2003, pg. 423). In Pullman's version, the story of man's fall as told in *Paradise Lost* is inverted, recast as an adventure story about a young woman battling the forces of evil, represented by the Church (Gee, 2008). Lyra's prophesied fate is to be a new Eve, to bring into the world knowledge and awareness, though in the eyes of the tyrannical Church, her fall will bring sin and death rather than the freedom of knowledge (*The Subtle Knife*, Knopf trade paperback edition, 2002, pg.

314). Additionally, the series includes references from Greek mythology and philosophy (“Learning to say goodbye,” Rustin and Rustin, 2003, pg. 423; Baynes, 2007), in the form of the boatman who ferries the souls, as well as Lyra and Will, to the land of the dead (*The Amber Spyglass*, 2002 edition, pg. 280), and the harpies who harass the dead (*The Amber Spyglass*, 2002 edition, pg. 289). Rustin and Rustin (“Learning to say goodbye,” 2003) also point out that Pullman makes use of such common tropes as “exotic creatures, animals who talk, witches, both nice and nasty, angels, adventurers who have the power of flight, commanders of science-fiction armadas, smooth villains driving large cars, seductive but vicious women” in order to connect to other works and types of fiction with which the reader is likely familiar (pg. 422). It should be noted that Rowling does much of the same thing, with her giants, trolls, unicorns, dragons, and purportedly evil wizards dressed all in black. No child reader and few teen readers could possibly have the familiarity necessary with Milton, Greek mythology, or the conventions of genre fiction to be able to understand the connections Pullman attempts to make.

### **III. Encouragement**

These series can have a powerfully uplifting effect for those reading them. As Overton’s (2003) study participants expressed, young adult literature tends to be hopeful and provoke feelings of possibility and wonder (pg. 27). In particular, these stories demonstrate that age, physical prowess, and beauty are not necessary factors for amazing achievement.

In both the Harry Potter series and the His Dark Materials series, the teenage protagonists are largely responsible for saving their respective worlds. Harry finally

defeats Voldemort in a duel (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 2007, pgs. 743-44), while Lyra takes the Fall and experiences first love, thereby stopping the flow of Dust into the void of nothingness, and decides with Will that they will not continue their relationship in their own worlds so that the holes between worlds can be closed and Dust can continue to flow to all the worlds as it should (*The Amber Spyglass*, 2002 edition, pgs. 492-93). Lyra also learns great lessons about the nature of life, namely that you have to deal with the family and the parents you have been given (“Where is home?” Rustin and Rustin, 2003, pg. 103), and that she must make her own way in the world. She also provides a wonderful model of moving on despite heartbreaking loss: she is separated from Will forever but decides that her life must move onward, though she has lost her love and the ability to read the alethiometer, she will struggle to regain what she once lost and to build a place of love and happiness here on earth (*The Amber Spyglass*, 2002 edition, pg. 518).

Bella Swan is not the most beautiful girl, nor the smartest, but it is she who captures Edward Cullen’s heart, and Edward wants her to stay just as she is, a flawed human, not become a vampire and thereby become amazingly beautiful and powerful. After becoming a vampire, it is Bella, who is neither the strongest nor best fighter, that is able to save her family from annihilation.

When asked by a former student battling depression to recommend some books that might provide a little optimism and hope, Sharon Black (2003) told her student to read Harry Potter (pg. 540). Black argues that the robust, energetic, and well-intentioned children of Rowling’s novels (and, I would argue, Pullman’s and Meyer’s novels as well), by first becoming “friends” with the reader, are ultimately able to teach the reader

how to cope. Black believes that the Harry Potter books can teach the adult reader how to deal with change and “strangeness”, as the world around Harry and his friends is in a constant state of flux, down to the stairways and paintings (2003, pgs. 541-42). Lyra and Bella also must deal with quickly changing surroundings, including suddenly learning the identity of your parents and venturing into new worlds, and discovering that the boy you have a crush on is a vampire and your best friend is a werewolf. If these young people can handle such earth-shattering discoveries and momentous events, then certainly the adults reading about them can handle whatever issues come their way as well.

#### **IV. Connection with Others**

One of the primary appeals of these books, and all other works of young adult literature, is their ability to forge connections between readers. This phenomenon has been particularly strong in the case of two of the series examined in this paper: the Harry Potter books and the Twilight saga.

Few other books in modern literary history have been greeted with as much fanfare and jubilation as the Harry Potter books. Bookstores and libraries in every community staged parties and events to celebrate the release of each title, and prior to each release speculation on every aspect of the plot was rampant across the Internet. Readers formed new communities online, fan sites dedicated to dissecting every detail of Rowling’s books and the world they create, among them The Harry Potter Lexicon (<http://www.hp-lexicon.org/>) and The Leaky Cauldron (<http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/>). Maguire (1999) states that one of the appealing and rare features of the Harry Potter series is its celebration of tribal membership. Harry, Ron and Hermione live

and die, so to speak, according to the fortunes of their Hogwarts house, Gryffindor. In the same way, readers of the series have banded together to form a tribe with the same references and allegiances. Tucker (1999) even speculates that the special vocabulary of the Harry Potter books (words like “Muggle” for nonmagical people, or the names of the houses: Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin) could have been used by readers to identify other readers (pg. 232).

Similarly, the readers of Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight saga have established a large online presence, creating “an entire world of Twilight on the web” (Green, 2008, pg. 44). Green (2008) alleges that what set the Twilight saga apart from other YA novels was “the way teens tracked down fellow readers immediately after closing the books” (pg. 45). Meyer’s online presence, in the form of her personal website and interactions with fans via fan sites, inspired greater activity online. The Twilight Lexicon (<http://www.twilightlexicon.com/>) receives approximately 30,000 visitors per day. Meanwhile, the TwilightMOMS site (<http://www.twilightmoms.com/>) demonstrates that the series is very popular among older (non-teenage) women and women with children.

Most importantly, these books get adults and teens to read together and discuss what they’ve read. Fialkoff (1999) imagines that many parents must be reading Rowling’s books in order to stay in touch with their children “Kids come in and tell me they loved the book,” a bookseller told Maughan (1999, pg. 92) about the Harry Potter books, “and I can say ‘I liked it, too.’ That connection makes kids a little more willing to listen to and trust my other recommendations.” This effect is not confined to booksellers; parents can benefit from the shared experience of reading one of these books alongside their daughter or son. Michael Chabon (2004) reports discussing with his daughter what

kind of daemon she would likely have if she lived in Lyra's world (pg. 27). These books, with their fantastical worlds and accessible characters, provide a safe subject around which adults and teens can gather and discuss, hopefully building a rapport that will allow for even stronger connections in the future.

## **V. Accessibility**

As Overton (2003) stated, one of the great strengths of young adult literature is that, "The writing is clear, the voices authentic, and the themes are expressed realistically enough that people of many ages can identify and empathize with the characters" (pg. 17). In other words, these books are written in such a way as to allow them to be understood and enjoyed by as many people as possible. Participants in Overton's (2003) focus groups reported enjoying the quality of writing in young adult literature, particularly because it tended to be "more concise" than adult fiction (pg. 29). Despite their frequently hefty size, the books of these three series can generally be read quickly, maybe in a few evenings, and their relatively short chapters make them easy to pick up and put down as needed.

Reviews of books in the Twilight saga have emphasized the "terrific tension-filled storylines" and well-written action scenes (de Lint, 2008, pg. 40), as well as the speed with which the books can be read (Blasingame, 2006, pg. 633).

Rowling is credited by the critics as producing books that are easy to read and engrossing. Tucker (1999) describes Rowling's writing as "good, workman-like prose with no frills attached and with an excellent feeling for plot-driven, often highly suspenseful narrative" (pg. 228).

Rustin and Rustin (“Learning to say goodbye,” 2003) praise Pullman’s writing as “evocative and poetic” (pg. 424), and feel the series is a powerful and suspenseful narrative that also serves to “provide his readers with a great deal by way of mental and emotional sustenance” (pg. 425). Pullman explained that his goal in writing is always “to make it perfectly clear to the reader what’s happening. In other words, I don’t want there to be any doubt as to where we are or what’s going on or who’s present and who’s speaking and what the weather’s like and where the light’s coming from. I want to make it as clear as I possibly can” (Odean, 2000, pg. 53).

## **VI. The Importance of Marketing**

While the bulk of this analysis has been concerned with how the books of the Harry Potter series, His Dark Materials series, and Twilight saga have appealed to adult readers, it is also important to consider how these books have been marketed in such a way as to make them attractive to adults.

The first book in Pullman’s His Dark Materials Series, *The Golden Compass* (1995), is considered the first young adult book to be cross-marketed to adult readers (Cart, 2009, pg. 74). The promotional campaign mounted by Knopf for *The Golden Compass* “involved both an adult-sized amount of money, marketing and publicity,” and was considered one of the more successful young adult promotion campaigns in recent history (Rosen, 1997, pg. 29). Because editors believed the book had significant adult appeal, all marketing efforts were targeted at making *The Golden Compass* a crossover success. Word of mouth became important in talking up the book even among Knopf staff, and many bookstores chose not to sell *The Golden Compass* as a children’s book

(Rosen, 1997, pg. 30). Different paperback editions of the series have been published, some with covers showing the books' main characters, and others with more stylized covers though to be more appealing to adults. The *His Dark Materials* series has also been the subject of much controversy, primarily related to the novels' religious themes; the Catholic League in particular was a vocal critic (Baynes, 2007). This controversy may have brought the books to the attention of adults who otherwise might have been unlikely to pick them up.

Word-of-mouth praise about *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* began flying soon after the book's 1997 publication in the U.K. (where it went by the title *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*). American readers sought out the British version of the second volume of the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, before it became available in the U.S. (Maughan, 1999, pg. 92). The instant popularity of the books among both children and adults led certain members of the literati to bemoan "the infantilization of reading culture" (Cart, 2009, pg. 74; see Safire, 2000; Byatt, 2003; Travis, 2005), though this additional publicity may only have served to increase the profile of the series. British publishers have simultaneously released editions of the books for young and adult readers; the adult editions have covers that are less likely to embarrass their readers on the subway or in line at the post office (Cart, 2009, pg. 74). American publishers, in addition to the major chain bookstores, insist the approach of simultaneous publishing won't work here to address the problem of how to reach both adult and young adult audiences (Cart, 2009, pg. 75).

The marketing and promotion of the *Twilight* series have relied heavily on the Internet. As mentioned previously, Stephenie Meyer has established a very visible



presence online, reaching out to readers on social networking sites and participating in online discussion groups. Meyer distributed her personal email address to fans and answered their most detailed questions about her books. In 2008, the author even hosted a real prom for her online fans (Green, 2008, pg. 44). With the phenomenal growth in popularity of the Twilight saga, Meyer has recently reduced her online interaction with fans to exchanges through or occasional visits to fan sites (Green, 2008, pg. 46).

Additionally, movies have been made from each of these series. The first six books of the Harry Potter series have been made into films, with the most recent “Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince,” released in July 2009, raking in almost \$160 million in ticket sales in the first five days after its debut (Barnes, 2009, pg. 2). Pullman’s *The Golden Compass* (1995) was made into a film that grossed over \$150 million after its release in December 2007 (Gee, 2008, pg. 35). When “Twilight,” the film adaptation of the first volume in Meyer’s series, was released in November 2008, it made over \$70 million in ticket sales during its opening weekend (Barnes, 2008, pg. 1). A film adaptation of the second book in the saga, *New Moon* (2006), is due out this November (Memmott & Cadden, 2009, pg. 5d). The marketing campaigns for these films might have included new measures meant to increase the visibility of the books on which they are based. The press generated by the release of these movies may have brought the books to the attention of adult readers who otherwise might not have known about them or considered reading them.

## CONCLUSION

The phenomenal popularity of the seven books of the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, the three volumes of the His Dark Materials series by Philip Pullman, and the four titles of the Twilight saga extends beyond the young adults for whom the books are nominally intended to adult readers. Like their younger counterparts, adult readers interact on a personal level with the novels and create their own meanings by reading the text through a filter comprised of their own personal beliefs, expectations, and experiences. For this reason, we can never know precisely why a particular book appealed to a given individual person. However, after a thorough examination of the book in question, we can make generalizations about the ways in which it might have appealed to large groups of readers.

First and foremost, these best-selling young adult novels provide adult readers with the means to escape their daily realities and dwell in a world of magic and wonder. That all three series are part of the fantasy genre is no coincidence; their fantastical settings and plotlines provide the adult reader greater ability to move beyond the limited horizons of the real world. However, the incredible beasts and magical characters of these novels belie their core messages about growing up. These books are deeply familiar to their adult readers, because they faithfully recreate the universal experiences of adolescence and because they are built on a foundation of centuries of literary tradition.

Additionally, these books remind adult readers about their own capabilities by demonstrating that even the very young are able to dramatically affect the world. The

youthful characters of these young adult series also provide readers with wonderful examples of how to handle the changes that attend all times of life.

These novels can also forge connections between peoples of all ages. Readers connect over common references and allegiance and form communities, in person and online. Many adults read these books to strengthen connections with the young people in their lives and to gain a better understanding of what it's like to be a young person in today's world.

Lastly, the ways in which these stories are crafted and sold by their authors and publishers must be taken into account. Because they've been written for younger readers, most adults find them easy and quick reads. Additionally, their storylines are fast-paced and exciting. In marketing the books of these series, publishers have used novel tactics, including publishing different adult and YA editions and conducting online promotional campaigns, to target adult readers.

These conclusions have real implications on library practice. Librarians serving in a reader's advisory capacity should be aware that what many adults find appealing about these particular books are their abilities to transport the reader to an exciting new world, or to remind the reader of the poignant experiences of adolescence. The next step may be identifying other books of both young adult and adult literature that produce the same effect. Libraries may want to start parent/child book clubs to discuss young adult literature as a means of increasing cross-generational communication and partnership. Librarians should also be aware that some of the adults reading these popular works of young adult literature may be looking for books that will not prove challenging to read.

These young adult novels have the power to be meaningful tools in the lives of adult readers.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

There are a few areas relevant to this examination of young adult literature that could benefit from further research. A study like that conducted by Overton (2003) in which adults who had read these series were placed in focus groups to discuss their experiences could serve to confirm or disprove the claims made in this paper. Such a study would make the logical next step in continuing the research begun here.

The field could also benefit from a more thorough examination of the popularity of each of these three series, the Harry Potter series, His Dark Materials series, and Twilight saga, particularly if such an examination included accurate estimates on the number of adults who have read at least one book from the given series or the proportion of book copies sold to adults intending to keep the book for themselves.

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